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Enhancing 21st century learning skills via digital storytelling: Voices of Malaysian teachers and undergraduates

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Abstract

Research studies have discovered that digital storytelling which combines the art of storytelling with a variety of interactive media tools can benefit language learning in a variety of ways. It has been found to encourage and motivate students and at the same time enhance their communication skills and enable them to build conceptual skills and technological skills – all in-line with 21st century skills required by the job market. This paper will describe the use of digital storytelling as an innovation for learning English in an English for Academic Purpose (EAP) course, and the teachers and students' responses to the innovation. The analysis of preliminary data will be derived from interviews with five teachers, and the students' questionnaire survey. The discussion of the preliminary findings will explore to what extent the project enhances the promotion of 21st century skills, such as interactive communication skills, interpersonal skills, technology literacy skills as well as language skills.

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Keywords: digital storytelling; computer-assisted language learning; technology and language learning; English for Academic Purposes; interactive media tools

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Introduction

Digital storytelling (DST) involves the integration of technology and the use of interactive media (which may include digital audio, video, movies, digital comic books and multimedia images). It is similar to traditional storytelling in that it is an exercise in communication and a creative process that requires participants to visualize and use their imaginations. It can help build the 21st century skills that are needed in modern workforce by enabling students gain competence in skills considered as an important part of any curriculum. According to the book *Digitales, the Art of Telling Digital Stories*, DST assists in the development of effective communication skills and experiences in specific areas such as:

- Interactive communication
- Interpersonal skills
- Personal and social responsibility
- Technology literacy
- Relevant, high-quality products
- Basic and visual literacy
- Curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking

How does DST help in the achievement of the above mentioned goals? Basically, it allows students to use interactive media to engage an audience and show what they have learned. This requires knowledge of the subject and ability to think in the process of converting their materials into interactive media format. This process is personal and meaningful because they are engaged with it and learned to think about it in a new way. It also involves communication, collaboration and team work as each group of students share their knowledge and know-how with each other. By creating a video as the end product of their work, the participants have to use critical thinking and problem solving skills in order to convey a coherent message. When making the video, the students have to make decisions about which information to include and about how to most effectively format that information to convey their messages. By using digital media to search for materials on an issue meaningful to them and then convey their message to other people through their digital stories, the students are participating in the act of teaching and raising awareness. In order to conduct online research to create a video, the students have to learn how to use software and search on the Web in a variety of ways. This use of technology enables them to gain a better conceptual understanding of the technology that they are using. Thus it can be seen here that the skills they can learn from digital storytelling are all skills relevant for the 21st century job market in general. (Ideas for this are drawn from Robin, 2008).

The process of creating a digital story as shown above is rather daunting; however, research studies have shown that its benefits are manifolds. It has been shown to improve students' organizational skills, research skills, and enhance their interest in the content taught (Paull, 2002; Salpeter, 2005). It has also been found to accelerate students' comprehension, written skills and vocabulary development (Burmark 2004; Kajder & Swenson, 2004; Papadopoulou & Ioannis, 2010).

DST has also gained ground in Asia. Research carried out in this area has shown positive results as attested by Gyabak and Godina (2011) who discovered that the use of DST could bridge the digital divide in a rural community school in Bhutan. Sadik (2008) demonstrated that the DST projects implemented by Egyptian teachers supported students' understanding of specific content in an academic course. Heo's (2009) study on the effects of digital storytelling on pre-service teachers' self-efficacy and professional dispositions unveiled that it could contribute to the transfer of knowledge and skills of personal technology to educational technology settings. Hafner and Miller (2001) reported that DST was able to foster independent learning among a group of English-medium university students in Hong Kong. All these skills are in-line with the needs of the 21st Century which affirms how pertinent DST is to the modern world.

Very few studies have been done on DST in Malaysia. The few existing studies look into the use of DST to teach moral education (such as Salimun, 2011; Norhayati & Siew, 2004) which show the dire needs for a study to explore the use of DST to enhance language teaching and learning especially in a tertiary setting which is the goal of the present study.

Digital Storytelling as an Innovation in an EAP course in UKM

The current study investigates the use of DST to teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to a group of students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (the National University of Malaysia). The general aim of this course is to enable students to develop study skills and academic proficiency in the English Language. The DST project was introduced to the course because the previous course has been found to rely too much on the textbooks, was too teacher-centered and depended mainly on face-to face interaction which resulted in poor attendance, unmotivated students and passive learners. The decision to include DST was also triggered by the awareness that technology has impacted the lives of the current generation of students in a ubiquitous way (Thang et al., 2012; Thang, Najihah, & Norizan, 2012). Hence it is believed that the introduction of technology will enhance these students learning of English.

The objectives of the project are:

1. To enhance the learning of English language skills.
2. To integrate digital literacy in English language learning.
3. To promote cooperative learning through group work.

Photo Story 3 is chosen as the software application for creating digital stories for the DST project course because it is a simple tool to use, requiring only a low threshold level of ICT skills and allowing offline access. A group-based activity approach is adopted involving 4-5 students working together to develop their digital stories. Robin and Pierson's (2005) procedural approach is adopted to create and integrate the digital stories. Figure 1 provides a description of the tasks and assessment involved. The class teacher is required to assess the end product (the digital story) at the end of the semester.

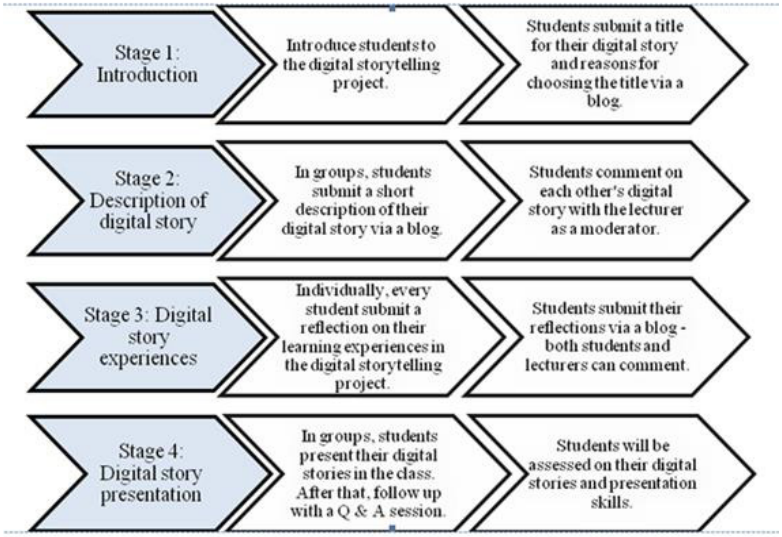

Figure 1. A description of the tasks and assessment involved in the DST

At the beginning of the semester, a workshop is given to introduce DST to the teachers and to give them hands-on lessons on how to use Photo Story 3. This is supported by follow-up sessions provided by two research assistants who have been trained to use Photo Story 3.

Students' perceptions of DST

A questionnaire survey for data collection was designed to identify students' attitude and self-perceived benefits derived from their participation in the DST project. The 31 items questionnaire consists of four categories: (1) autonomous learning, (2) soft skills (3) motivation and learning environment, and (4) language skills. The responses to each item was measured by a four-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree to 4=Strongly agree). The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the semester to all 244 students undertaking the ESS course. The return rate was 82.4% (201 questionnaires were collected). The data were tabulated and statistically analysed using SPSS version 17.

The findings revealed that the students generally had a favourable opinion of the DST project. They enjoyed working as a team and found the experience rewarding and in no way a distraction or an intrusion into their leisure time. On the whole they described the experience as contributing to their improvement in ICT skills, language skills, collaborative learning skills and autonomous learning skills. This positive view could be attributed to the fact that this generation of students are very computer savvy and hence appreciate the opportunity to use technology whenever possible.

Teachers' perceptions of DST

Five teachers teaching the course were interviewed by co-researchers involved in the research project. Interview sessions were conducted individually with each teacher at the end of the academic semester. Each interview was transcribed and analysed for similar themes. From the thematic analysis of the interview data, all the teachers agreed that the DST Project promoted team work among the students, and the value of collaboration was evident.

T1: …they learned how to cooperate, how to interact and there's a give and take, you know, when one person cannot do this job for example so the others will try to help and so on and so forth…

T2: …they meet as a group, they learned from each other. So, it's better than working individually…

T3: the team spirit or teamwork coming through where the students share and learn from each other.

T4: I think probably it forces students to work together.

T5: …Certain group they are supportive of each other …and the girls they make it a point to work together to get help from outside…

Besides that, three teachers also observed that the DST Project provided more opportunities for learners to develop their language skills, communication skills, and ICT skills.

T2: I think they improve their writing skills through the draft and then from the presentation of course they have improved their oral communication skills.

T3: …they were able to develop, maybe some communication skills in English cause they are required to share… I think it also help to develop other skills related to media production…

T5: Of course they have to discuss and one group did say that every time they have a discussion, they make it a point to speak in English. So that is very good and my students' English is very poor. I ask them come out with captions and all that.

In addition, T3 also elaborated on how the DST Project helped the learners to "project their creativity onto the story" and gained "the confidence to use the language in the presentation". Furthermore, he observed that the learning experience through the DST Project was different:

T3: …they have something at the end. The output which they are all proud of. So that's a good example of experience. Because we are not just teaching them, we are giving them and they have nothing to show for if you just test them like what we are doing, like quizzes and final exam, they have nothing to take away except the grade. But this one they have something to take away.

It is interesting to note that T4 did not share such similar observations with the other teachers. He found that the DST Project was more beneficial for the more proficient students, and not for the weaker students. Nevertheless, he commented that:

T4: I would recommend DST provided that first, the instructors would have to be thoroughly briefed on the DST, thoroughly…if we actually see the goodness of the DST and plan it very well I think it can be a useful device, a useful thing for the students.

Discussion and Conclusion

The preliminary findings of the research project revealed that both teachers and students responded positively toward the implementation of the DST Project in the ESS course. The students indicated that the learning benefits they harnessed from their participation in the DST Project were more holistic as they also learned to work independently, as well as collaboratively in a group. Similarly, teachers teaching the course also observed that the value of team work was the most evident benefit. In addition, learning through the DST Project has also widened the learning scopes from language skills to other skills such as ICT, communication, and creative thinking. Thus, it would appear that the decision to incorporate the DST project in the ESS course was a wise one as it promotes skills that are relevant to the 21st century job market. However, in the course of implementing a new technological innovation to enhance learning, it is pertinent for teachers themselves to be prepared to use 21st century approaches in their own classrooms. The significant role of technology in learning is undeniable as current research are directed into examining how computers and technological tools should best be used and for what purposes, and no longer interested to query the need in the classroom (Beatty, 2010). Therefore, teachers should realize that technological innovations will become a culture in learning and it will begin with the teachers and the pedagogical processes they employ in learning (Yelland, Cope & Kalantzis, 2008).

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